

**The Bill Blackwood
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**Succession Planning for Small to Medium Sized
Law Enforcement Agencies**

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**By
Daniel David McManus Jr.**

**Bastrop Police Department
Bastrop, Texas
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ABSTRACT

For many small and medium size law enforcement agencies, having an ongoing strategic succession planning can be difficult to accomplish. These agencies may struggle with the process because of a lack of money, time, and resources in staff to not only plan out the process, but to carry out an ongoing career development schedule. Since small and medium size agencies create over 86% of the overall local and state law enforcement agencies (Reaves, 2011), it is important for the nutrition of the profession to strengthen career development and leadership transition.

Succession plans are not a new concept. This paper will address concerns from obstacles that might prevent the planning process. One of the solutions is to look to other departments that have developed their own systems. Starting the succession planning process is a matter of setting out measurable goals to accomplish career development that provides for leadership needs for the future.

Creating a succession plan is a great investment for a small and medium size law enforcement agency. This process can allow potential leaders to develop their skills and confidence, which can greatly affect not only the efficiency of the department but the morale as well. Leaders in law enforcement can cause a department to grow and prosper even after they leave. Failure to do so, however, can cause a void of knowledge and effective leadership that can set their department back, thus causing conflict within from personnel and possibly causing the public to lose their confidence in the department. Ultimately, small to medium sized law enforcement agencies should develop and implement a succession plan

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INTRODUCTION

Small to medium size agencies are often task with the stresses of handling day-to-day issues on short staffing levels. Conditions such as this can create a shortsighted vision throughout the department. The focus of succession planning process will discuss the difficulties and benefits that might differ for small and medium size agencies that some larger agencies do not have to deal with. The Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, Inc., (CALEA) has classified small and medium sized law enforcement agencies into two sizes. Small agencies have 1 to 24 officers and medium size agencies have 25 to 74 officers (Cordner & Gordon, n.d.). The United States Bureau of Justice Statistics list in 2008 stated that there were 17,985 state and local law enforcement agencies; however, out of those agencies, 15,498 were small (0-24 officers) and medium (25-49 officers) size agencies. These agencies make up 86% of the overall law enforcement agencies, with 72.8% of them being small agencies (Reaves, 2011).

Law enforcement agencies continue to strive toward creating an efficient and well trained staff of leaders to not only successfully transition in the new leadership role within the agency but to also effectively handle adverse situations that they might be assigned to that are outside of their normal duties. Succession planning is a written system that is established to accomplish specific goals for developing both formal and positive informal leaders of the agency to sharpen their skills. They also learn from the experience on how to prepare for advanced responsibilities in the future.

This paper will measure the benefits of succession planning and how it can affect the agency. Some of the benefits of succession planning are to develop a legacy and

vision for the department. This is a vision not only for the immediate success, but for the years ahead, after leadership personnel change positions. Evaluating personnel can be very rewarding by realizing officers' abilities, skills, and weaknesses. After evaluating leaders within the department, a system of mentorship and coaching can be used for continued growth of the officer's skills and coaching to assist with building strengths and minimize weaknesses.

As with starting many projects, there are issues that departments and personnel will be concerned with. In the case of starting a system for continuous ongoing planning and mentoring of staff, two concerns immediately come to the forefront. Concerns of how labor intensive the process will be and the potential cost involved will be reviewed. This paper will show that small to medium sized law enforcement agencies should develop and implement a succession plan.

POSITION

Developing a succession plan cannot be effective if it is something that is casually implemented here and there and virtually kept to one's self. Creating a legacy involves establishing a vision for the department and creating specific steps that will be designed to accomplish those goals. To be effective and succeed in accomplishing those goals, a system must be put in place for a succession plan to fully develop the potential leaders for the department. Kolzow (2014) stated that leadership development programs that are successful start with aligning the "leadership development to organizational strategy and an understanding of the type of leadership style/ styles needed to execute the strategy. The organization then needs to construct an incremental series of steps to meet current and future leadership needs" (p. 284).

Small and medium size agencies are task with a difficult job of completing with day-to-day tasks, which, in many cases, will be done with minimum staffing levels. This can lead to many issues including failing to develop leaders for tomorrow. Creating a legacy for the department is vital for truly changing not only the culture in a department but the abilities of the personnel within. In this case, a legacy means what an executive or administrator leaves for their successor. One-way of creating and maturing this legacy is through succession planning.

Developing a legacy for leadership within a department is one of the greatest investments a leader can do for their organization. Building a legacy cannot be accomplished by selecting a process or plan that is inconsistent or changes by personnel. To effectively build for the future, a system will need to be put in place. John C. Maxwell (2012) defined a system as “a process for predictably achieving a goal based on specific, orderly, repeatable principles and practices” (p. 109). Succession planning is a process to identify and mentor current and potential leaders into developing over a period of time by growing with experience and in skill levels both personally and professional.

Too often, agencies wait for an exceptional person to come into the department before it recognizes a possible future successor. Hoffman and Womack (2011) stated “Beyond the first or second organizational layer, the succession planning team typically has only minimal awareness of the employees who actually produce results for the company-the ‘pivotal talent’ that makes the organization successful” (p.1). A successful plan can turn an average employee into a more competent and advanced leader within an agency. Michael Gerber, author of *The E Myth* made the statement, “Systems permit

ordinary people to achieve extraordinary results predictably. However, without a system; even extraordinary people find it difficult to predictably achieve even ordinary results” (as cited in Motivational teacher, n.d., para. 6). Establishing a system for succession planning is a must for creating an effective, long-term process for evaluating and developing officers in the same manner through multiple years.

Michelson (2006) wrote that the “public sectors such as law enforcement agencies have been slow to catch up with the private sector and military when it comes to succession planning” (p.1). Businesses are results driven. However, succession planning is a tool that they use to develop their employees, to harness their skills, and to ease the transitioning personnel into new positions of leadership. For many small and medium size departments, especially surrounded by larger departments, it is difficult to compete with recruiting and retaining high quality officers for who might be seen as potential leaders. Succession planning may help with retention and to assist with becoming a magnet for talent. Balzac (2011) stated, “Recognize that no one is coming to work for you because they care about your needs. They are looking to satisfy their needs. You must demonstrate to them from the beginning that meeting your needs will also meet their needs” (p. 55). Potential leaders will need to feel valued and have a sense of ownership within the department.

One of the main steps in succession planning is evaluating personnel’s talent and potential. Organizations often fail to see the value in the evaluation of officers in regard to their potential as future leaders with the necessary skills for leading an organization. Officers’ potentials have been measured with regard to their work as patrol officer or in specialized units in order to advance to the next position/opportunity.

Therefore, the organizations can run a great risk of not understanding what the needed skills might be for each individual officer to develop their potential to become an effective leader. Hoffman and Womack (2011) said “Nor is there an in-depth understanding of skills and experiences those individuals will need to round out their development and make them capable of handling more responsibility in the future” (p. 1).

Evaluating potential leaders can be done in multiple stages. Some potential leaders are already recognized by their rank/ positions within the organization. However, an agency should also look at who the positive informal leaders of the department are. These officers have a tremendous potential for leading the organization in a positive direction. Bratton (2008) stated, “every employee has their own particular skills, abilities, and experiences that make them unique” (p. 2). This process will allow for recognizing the officer’s skills and abilities that can be enhanced with continued support to be later used in key position of influence or responsibility. Maxell (2001) stated, “You have a group of talented individuals, but if each person is not doing what adds the most value to the team, you won’t achieve your potential as a team (p. 35).

Another critical phase in succession planning is that once the leaders have been evaluated, the next step is to mentor or coach them. This phase is the actual development process. Weinzel (2012) wrote, “Once potential leaders are identified, take the time to teach them. These individuals will need nurturing and guidance in order to learn and grow into the leaders of tomorrow” (p. 3). An officer’s strengths can be used to not only better the organization but to enhance and grow in those skills and mature in

their abilities. A leader who takes the time to not only recognize an officer's weaknesses but uses a proactive approach to help develop the officer's weaker skills is one of the best results of the mentoring phase. An officer should not be surprised during the promotion process that he is not qualified because of poor leadership skills or lacking knowledge of what is expected of them. A common example of this is public speaking. During the mentoring phase, the leader can assist the officer develop their skills by giving presentations to different events or groups such as citizen's police academies, city council meetings, and community groups. While promoting higher within the department, officers will find that the position will require more administrative duties and less law enforcement work. It is important to remember during the mentoring phase to teach the officer why the tedious administrative duties are important and what it accomplishes. Balzac (2011) wrote, "it's hard to take pride in irrelevant work. Be sure to demonstrate the relevance of the job" (p. 56). This is especially true when a new supervisor begins to learn why documentation is so important for issues down the road, whether it is for human resource or potential liability issues.

Once organizations successfully begin to develop and mentor their potential leaders, not only should the organization be more productive, but it should also aid the transition process from a promotion or assigned duty to be smooth. Hoffman and Womack (2011) stated, "When critical openings occur, these companies are ready to fill the positions with skilled, experienced internal candidates because they have planned for a transition-by ensuring that the individuals selected have been exposed to the proper training and career development opportunities" (p. 2).

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

One large concern with creating a succession plan is the labor-intensive process and tasks the department or its leadership will have to undertake in not only developing the program but also continuing the steps as an ongoing process. Unfortunately, departments search for the perfect system before trying to implement it. The succession plan needs to be a system that it evaluated and changed as needed to continue to accomplish its goal. Olsen (2012) said, “don’t be concerned about finding the perfect way to conduct a strategic process. Perfection doesn’t really exist...” (p. 13). A system can be put in place that is “good enough.” This means that a system that can be good enough if it is used as a starting point to begin to accomplish the set goals with the intent to continue to develop the system to its optimal capability. Developing the succession plan should not be up to one person to create it. Balzac (2011) wrote, “Creativity is not the province of one or two people. It is the province of everyone. Innovation is a group effect. It’s up to you to create an environment that fosters creativity and innovation” (p. 181).

In smaller departments, it can be difficult to not only set aside the time to create a program but having capable staff may not be in place to assist in developing the process. Some departments have aligned with surrounding agencies to create and develop multi-agency assessment teams. These teams are made up of members from multiple departments that assist in bringing an objective mindset into the process for evaluating an employee. This can also be useful to help relieve scheduling constraints in smaller departments. Other cities have already created succession plans and can be

implemented into the organization or used to lay the groundwork in what needs to be established, while also creating and developing a new plan.

With years of economical concerns and additional cost, training has become difficult budget item to request from city councils. Cost has become a deterrent for specialized training and formal leadership development. Bratton (2008) stated, "Providing top-quality training for employees is usually expensive and, therefore, chiefs of police should regularly look for opportunities to increase or augment that training budget with appropriate local training whenever possible" (p. 3). However, succession planning and the ongoing training that mentoring involves can become a great asset for the organization. DiMatteo (2008) wrote, "developing leaders from within often increases employee retention, dedication and moral which save HR Directors and the company time and money" (p. 1).

To help ease concerns of cost, the State of Texas is committed to the development of leaders in law enforcement and has created the Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMIT), which offers free and low cost training for first-line supervisors and administrators. The federal government also provides free and low cost training for the development of supervisors and executives in law enforcement agencies through training opportunities at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) National Academy and through the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC).

An agency should consider the cost of a city or county looking for a replacement in leadership from outside of the organization. A city manger might hire a company to conduct a costly search and interview process while attempting to fill that leadership

position. This expensive process might not be needed if a succession plan was put in place before the need arises.

RECOMMENDATION

It is critical that small and medium size agencies strategically plan for the future by implementing and succession process for their departments to ensure the growth and quality of the organization for the future. The leaders of the organizations should consider establishing a vision for their department. They should not only decide how they want it to grow and develop but should also decide what kind of legacy they want to leave behind for their successor. In implementing the succession plan, a leader must use a written system that establishes a process that works to accomplish a specific goal that can be repeated from one officer to the next.

Once a system is developed, the first step is to effectively evaluate the skills, abilities, and talents of the personnel in the department. An agency should understand that different positions might require different strengths and abilities. However, personnel weaknesses should be seen as an opportunity for personnel to grow and mature in their skills. The evaluation process should be done not only to look for potential executive leaders within the department, but for the potential first-line supervisors and informal leaders that add great influence to the morale, direction, and abilities of the organization.

Once potential leaders have been evaluated, the next step is to continue to mentor them. They should remember that leadership abilities are not born characteristic; they are a learned skill. These future leaders must be coached and given guidance as they prepare for their future responsibilities. This is the time when

strengths are reinforced and sharpened. These strengths are put to use with projects or responsibilities that allow them to continue to mature and benefit the department. It is during the mentoring stage that officers' weaknesses can be developed as well. This does not mean that they will be assigned responsibilities they might not be able to meet, but they should be given opportunities to continue to work on those skills that are lacking either through training or assignments. Officers should also be walked through the process of why they need to do certain task that may seem minuet or relevant. These tasks usually serve a greater purpose that is lost in the day-to-day operations, such as legal liability or administrative reporting responsibilities.

There may be many concerns with leaders of small and medium size agencies trying to implement a succession plan. One concern might be a fear of how labor intensive the process might be when attempting to establish the process and maintain it. The process does not have to be perfect or completely finished before implementing it. A department should make the process effective enough for accomplishing the written and specific goals; however, the process should be a continued work in progress. They should remember that other departments and public agencies have already developed and have implemented proven plans for succession planning. A department does not have to 're-invent the wheel' again for succession planning. These established plans could be used and modified in developing your own departments plan based on its capabilities and needs.

Another concern may be a fear of cost. In today's economy, many departments are finding that their budgets are becoming more restrictive, if not reduced. Small and medium size agencies struggle with not only restrains in training budgets, but

scheduling issues with minimum staffing as well. Multiple organizations such as LEMIT, FLETC, and the FBI National Academy offer low cost and free training for departments. In some cases, the department itself can host the training course. This not only assists with cutting the cost of sending officers out of town, but allows multiple officers to receive the same training at the same time. Training opportunities such as these can be a great asset for helping the overall mindset and cohesiveness of the officers in the department. Just as the ability to implement and modify succession plans from other departments are available to reduce the labor intensity fears, this same process can be used to greatly cut cost in the research and development of trying to start a new plan.

In concluding, creating a succession plan is a great investment for a small and medium sized law enforcement agencies. This process can allow potential leaders to develop their skills and confidence, which can greatly affect not only the efficiency of the department but the morale as well. Leaders in law enforcement can cause a department to grow and prosper even after they leave. Failure to do so, however, can cause a void of knowledge and effective leadership that can set their department back, causing conflict within from personnel and possibly causing the public to lose their confidence in the department.

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